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Lisa Gorton, *The Life of Houses* Giramondo Publishing, 224pp
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Every familiar place has this more intimate
architecture: these structures of memory, which build
our shelter within the shelter of a house.¹

The three-line epigraph comes from Lisa Gorton's second collection of poetry, *Hotel Hyperion*. Her newest creation, a novel called *The Life of Houses*, is similarly interested in these kinds of 'intimate architecture'. This novel is a fascinating examination of the affective structure and phenomenology of space, in which houses function as repositories of memory capable of exerting powerful physical and emotional holds on their inhabitants.

Moving through the affectively charged spaces of Gorton's novel are Anna, a Melbourne-based gallery owner, and her teenage daughter Kit. When *The Life of Houses* begins, Anna's marriage is in a state of crisis. Her husband has returned to the UK, and she has sent Kit to visit her grandparents in order to explore an alternative relationship with her lover Peter. Anna is herself largely estranged from her parents, having moved away from home at the first opportunity to attend art school.

The narrative focus of Gorton's novel moves back and forth between Anna and Kit, a movement that also takes the reader between two houses: Anna's home in Melbourne, and her childhood home in a small town on the Victorian coast. The latter is an imposing, sandstone structure over a century and a half old, whose history Anna's parents have been gathering and collating for decades. This proves to be a troublingly insular obsession for them, and one that feeds Anna's sense of her childhood home as stifling and her parents as determinedly narrow-minded. But the reader is not allowed to easily assume sides in this conflict, neither party emerging as overly sympathetic. Anna's parents fail to take an interest in her life as it exists outside of their own walls (although they do go so far as to employ her skills in appraising the prints that adorn them). Conversely, Anna retains a sense of her own superiority and a contempt for the town she has left behind. At moments she appears an awful parody of a Melbourne sophisticate, for whom even a family emergency cannot trump her desire for 'a decent coffee'.

Yet Gorton's depiction of intergenerational conflict is nuanced; the disharmony between Anna and her parents is not elicited by a specific incident or rupture, but rather by a saddening unwillingness of both parties to meet halfway. Moreover, while Anna is at first unlikable in appearing aloof or inhibited, it is for precisely these qualities that one ends up pitying her. They are what act as impediments in her connections with the people she loves. Indeed, there is a kind of pathos in way Anna holds herself back in her relationship with Peter, the way she cannot reach out and console her daughter:

¹ Lisa Gorton, *Hotel Hyperion* (Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing, 2013), 36.

Staring down at Kit's wrist, Anna thought: But I can't remember, not really, what it was like... of that immense dreadful life of hers I see nothing. I am permitted to see nothing. She tells herself, 'My mother would not understand', which only means that for her the worst thing of all would be my understanding. Whatever her life will be, she tells herself, it will not be like mine. And that is why I sit here stupidly saying nothing, why I do not take her hand in my two hands.²

Anna is eventually drawn back to the spaces of her childhood. While this is ostensibly due to a family crisis, the place seems to exert some other kind of hold on her. In a review of *Hotel Hyperion*, Paul Hetherington notes that Gorton's approach to space has great resonance with that of Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (1958).³ This is a resonance equally pronounced in *The Life of Houses*. Gorton entertains similar ideas to the philosopher about the kind of bodily communion that people form with the space of their house. For Bachelard, this was a bond most pronounced in one's childhood home, and he reflects that 'the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the "first stairway," we would not stumble on that rather high step'.⁴ Gorton's novel thus seems to explicitly echo Bachelard in referring to 'the house less a place than a cluster of habits belonging to left and right, upstairs and down' (32). Indeed, when Anna gets ready within the bathroom of her Melbourne home she becomes 'like those people who practice tai chi in the park' (30), while her father moves through his drawing room with 'a sleepwalker's familiarity' (128).

But perhaps more importantly, for Gorton as for Bachelard, people develop an affective as well as a bodily connection to their home. As sites of memory, houses are spaces through which characters can access the past. And in Gorton's novel memories seem to persist in the world, beyond the mind of the person to whom they belong. It is thus by inhabiting the spaces of her mother's childhood – the depths of an immovable mahogany bed, the entrance hall next to the umbrella stand, the cubby hole in the beach-side pine – that Kit is able to gain an image of Anna's past:

Kit had suddenly seen what was almost impossible to believe: that the past had existed really. *Here*, she thought: her mother had stood here. She touched the bark. *Here*, in this dust-hazed shade. At last, a picture of the child her mother had once been rose whole in Kit's mind (119).

In *The Life of Houses*, memories leave a kind of trace or afterimage that might be encountered in space.

One slight drawback of the novel's contemplation of the way spaces make us feel is that it sometimes tends toward the intellectual; while I could comprehend how certain sites held emotive force for the characters, these spaces often failed to elicit a strong affective response in me as a reader. In particular, Anna's childhood house is not made to loom very large in the reader's imagination. It did not seem to carry the

² Lisa Gorton, *The Life of Houses* (Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing, 2014), 179. All subsequent references to this edition will be incorporated into the text.

³ Paul Hetherington, 'Haunted Rooms,' *Sydney Review of Books*, 2013, accessed 28 Mar 2015; available from <http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/haunted-rooms/>

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 15.

emotive power of some of the structures imagined by writers who have been similarly interested in houses: for instance, David Malouf's old Queenslander, Gerald Murnane's strange houses of two or three stories, or even the cluttered rooms of Gorton's own *Hotel Hyperion*. Her poems in this earlier work afforded an accretion of detail, a piecemeal collection of object imagery that seemed to inhabit and give life to the rooms they imagined. In *The Life of Houses* such detail is often in danger of getting lost or dispersed in the flow of the narrative. That being said, there are moments which recall the achievement of the earlier work, when layers and textures are able to accumulate, as in the striking description of the drawing room in Anna's childhood house:

Crochet antimacassars on the armchairs; tasseled Persian rugs the size of doormats: the room had a layered indoorness: it absorbed sound. Even the gold-framed landscapes opened no vistas out: the picture glass was thick with dust. Kit looked longingly at the windows. Between heavy curtains there was the verandah's trim of iron lace. A frame outside a frame, it shrank the garden to a picture (128).

Yet to note such a discrepancy with her previous work is merely to suggest that in *The Life of Houses* Gorton's depiction of place risks being outshone by her depiction of people. And this is no great criticism, for it only serves to illustrate the range of this highly talented author. Gorton has already demonstrated her ability to trace the intricacies of furnished interiors, in *The Life of Houses* she displays her skill in tracing the intricacies of human relationships.